Recognizing and Assisting the Emotionally Troubled Student

Guidelines for Faculty and Staff

Counseling and Student Development Center
Division of Student Affairs & Enrollment Management
Campus Life Building 200
815-753-1206
www.niu.edu/csdcc

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your willingness to let him/her handle this part of the process is a vote of confidence and affirms his/her positive coping capacities (Level 1 or 2 severity).

- Call the Counseling and Student Development Center yourself, while the student is still in your office, and arrange an initial consultation for the student. If you feel this is an emergency situation, please indicate this when you contact us. Indicate your willingness to the student to provide the Counseling and Student Development Center with information about the nature of the problem and the reason for your referral (Level 2 or 3 severity).

- In an immediate emergency (i.e., Level 3 severity), you may decide to accompany the student to the Counseling and Student Development Center in person. This can be a significant source of support to a student in crisis. Depending on the circumstances, you may be able to accompany the student into the session. In an emergency, the student will be seen immediately (Monday through Friday). If possible, a call that you are bringing a student would be appreciated. Additionally, do not hesitate to contact the University Police (753-1212) for emergency assistance.

- If a Level 3 emergency occurs after hours during the semester, you may call the Counseling and Student Development Center (753-1206) for instructions to get in touch with a counselor who will assist you in assessment and referral by telephone.

What Happens When a Student Goes to the Counseling and Student Development Center

Students should be encouraged to arrange for a consultation by calling 753-1206 or stopping by Campus Life Building 200 during office hours. Students are seen as soon as possible, although during periods of high demand there may be a delay. In emergency situations, however, a student will be seen immediately.

Students are asked to fill out confidential information forms before meeting with a counselor. During the initial consultation, the counselor will assess the student’s concerns and needs and decide if the Counseling and Student Development Center is the most appropriate place for the student to receive assistance.

Students need to know that communication with us is confidential. We cannot discuss a student, his/her situation, or even the fact that counseling is being received at the Counseling and Student Development Center without the student’s permission. The only exceptions to this are imminent suicide, homicide, or suspected child or elder abuse, and even in these circumstances disclosures are limited to those who can provide immediate assistance.

If the counselor and student agree that individual counseling is appropriate, the student can expect to see a counselor on a regular basis, usually weekly for approximately 50 minutes each session. Other service options include group counseling, assistance with study skills (Coaching for Academic Success), or referral to another campus or community agency. It is possible that the student may leave the initial appointment feeling able to handle the problem on his/her own. We cannot require a student to accept any suggestion we make unless our professional judgment indicates that psychiatric hospitalization is mandatory.

How to Follow Up After a Referral

Once a referral has been initiated, it is reasonable and prudent to follow up with the student to determine if he/she actually has attended counseling. Depending on the nature of your relationship with the student, you may also find yourself wondering, “How is it going?” If this is done in a non-intrusive way, such a question may be well received. The student’s right to privacy, however, should always be respected.

If you wish to give us information about a student you referred, you may do so. Please remember that the counselor-client relationship is confidential, so we will not be able to release information about a specific student without permission from the student unless we determine that the student or someone else is in physical danger.
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Guidelines for Faculty and Staff

Faculty and Staff as Helping Resources for Students

The emotional and academic pressure of university life, while manageable and even exhilarating for most students, can be simply overwhelming for others. Such students may not yet have attained the level of maturity necessary to develop adequate coping skills, or they may be struggling with relatively long-standing emotional deficits that are exacerbated by the transition to college life.

Consequently, due to your position, status, and visibility on campus, students experiencing emotional distress may turn to you for help. Or, because of your role, you may find yourself confronted by a disturbed or disturbing student who needs assistance. How you respond in these situations could impact significantly on the student’s ability to deal constructively with his/her emotional conflicts.

In this brochure we offer specific, concrete guidelines that you can utilize for recognizing, intervening with, and referring emotionally troubled students so that they can get the help they need.

Recognizing Emotionally Troubled Students

At one time or another, everyone feels stressed, depressed, or anxious. However, some behaviors occurring over a period of time can suggest that the problems with which the student is dealing are more than the expected ones. The following are three levels of behaviors indicating this kind of distress. (Adapted with permission from information provided by the Counseling and Mental Health Center of the University of Texas, Austin, Texas.)

Level 1. Although not disruptive to others, these behaviors may indicate that help is needed:

- serious grade problems or a change from consistently good grades to unaccountably poor performance;
- excessive absences, especially if the student previously demonstrated consistent class and/or work attendance;
- unusual or markedly changed pattern of interaction, i.e., totally avoiding participation, becoming excessively anxious when called upon, dominating discussion, etc.;
- other characteristics that may indicate a problem include depressed mood and lethargic behavior; excessive activity and very rapid speech; swollen, red eyes; marked change in personal dress and hygiene; anxious behavior; and falling asleep in class or at work.

Level 2. These behaviors may indicate significant emotional distress and also a reluctance or inability to acknowledge a need for personal help:

- repeated requests for special consideration, such as deadline extensions (especially if the student appears uncomfortable or highly emotional disclosing the circumstances prompting the request);
- new or consistent behavior which pushes the limits of decorum and which interferes with the effective management of your class or work setting;
- an unusual or exaggerated emotional response that is obviously inappropriate to the situation.

Level 3. These behaviors usually show students in obvious crisis who need emergency care:

- highly disruptive behavior (hostile, aggressive, violent, etc.);
- inability to communicate clearly (garbled, slurred speech, unconnected or disjointed thoughts);
- loss of contact with reality (seeing/hearing things that aren't present, beliefs or actions greatly at odds with reality or probability);
- overtly suicidal thoughts (referring to suicide as a current option);
- homicidal threats.

What Can You Do?

Level 3 problems are the easiest to identify and handle in that there are specific procedures for helping students in crisis. Basically, you need to stay calm and know who to call for help. The information is outlined in the section of this brochure entitled “How to Make a Referral.”

In dealing with a student who exhibits Level 1 or Level 2 behavior you may choose to approach the student or the student may seek your help with a problem. Below are some suggestions which might be helpful for you in dealing with a troubled student.

- Demonstrate your respect for the student by talking to the student when both of you have sufficient time and are in a private place free from disturbance by others.

When in Doubt, Consult

If you have specific questions about a student, or are unsure about whether or how to approach this individual to make a referral, call the Counseling and Student Development Center at 753-1206, indicate that you are concerned about a student, and ask to speak to the counselor handling emergencies. The Counseling and Student Development Center staff member can help you:

1. assess the seriousness of the situation;
2. learn about resources, both on and off campus, so that you can provide the student with potential options for obtaining assistance;
3. decide how best to initiate the referral process;
4. clarify your own feelings regarding the student and consider how you can be most effective.

How to Make a Referral

Once you have decided to refer a student to the Counseling and Student Development Center, you can proceed in any of the following ways:

- Suggest that the student call or walk in to arrange for an initial consultation during office hours (Level 1 severity).
- Suggest that the student use your telephone to arrange for an initial consultation while the student is still in your office. When the call is made from your office, you know that at least the initial contact has been made. By making the call him/herself, however, the student is exercising personal responsibility and is more likely to follow through to get help. In addition,